

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at a Townhall Meeting on Fatherhood and a Question-and-Answer Session

June 19, 2009

The President. Hello, everybody. Please be seated. Thank you so much. And let me, first of all, thank John and Joe and Juan Carlos and Etan and Mike for sharing their remarkable stories with us. And let me thank Mike Strautmanis for helping to guide us through this process. Where did Mike go? There he is over there.

A couple other people that I want to acknowledge. First of all, our terrific Secretary of Transportation, Ray LaHood, is here in the house. A dear friend of mine, former colleague in the Senate, Senator Evan Bayh is here; where is—Evan go. Okay. Chicago's own, Congressman Danny Davis, from the West Side—where's Danny? He was here a second ago. Give him a round of applause anyway.

And I want to thank kids from the Life Pieces to Masterpieces as well—and Foundry United Methodist Church. Thank you very much for your participation. And I want to thank members of the faith-based advisory council's subcommittee on fatherhood that has helped us to organize these events today.

Good afternoon, everybody. It is wonderful to see you. I see some familiar faces in the house. Rev, how are you doing? It is great to have all of you here today as we gear up to celebrate Father's Day and to recognize the vital role that fathers play in our communities and, obviously, in our families.

This townhall marks the beginning of a national conversation that we hope to start about fatherhood and personal responsibility, about how fathers across America are meeting the challenges in their families and communities, and what government can do to support those who are having a difficult time. Today you've had a chance to hear from five of those fathers, men who are doing an outstanding job of meeting their obligations in their own lives.

We all know the difference that a responsible, committed father like those five gentlemen can make in the life of a child. Fathers are our first teachers and coaches. They're our mentors; they're our role models. They set an example of success, and they push us to succeed, encourage us when we're struggling. And they love us even when we disappoint them, and they stand by us when nobody else will.

And when fathers are absent, when they abandon their responsibilities to their children, we know the damage that that does to our families. Some of you know the statistics. Children who grow up without fathers are more likely to drop out of school and wind up in prison. They're more likely to have substance abuse problems, run away from home, and become teenage parents themselves.

And I say this as someone who grew up without a father in my own life. Now, I had a heroic mom and wonderful grandparents who helped raise me and my sister, and it's because of them that I'm able to stand here today. But despite all their extraordinary love and attention, that doesn't mean that I didn't feel my father's absence. That's something that leaves a hole in a child's heart that a government can't fill.

Our Government can build the best schools with the best teachers on Earth, but we still need fathers to ensure that kids are coming home and doing their homework and having a book instead of the TV remote every once in a while. Government can put more cops on the streets, but only fathers can make sure that those kids aren't on the streets in the first place. Government can create good jobs, but we need fathers to train for these jobs and hold down these jobs and provide for their families.

If we want our children to succeed in life, we need fathers to step up. We need fathers to understand that their work doesn't end with conception; that what truly makes a man a father is the ability to raise a child and invest in that child.

And we need fathers to be involved in their kids' lives not just when it's easy—not just during the afternoons in the park or at the zoo, when it's all fun and games—but when it's hard, when young people are struggling, and there aren't any quick fixes or easy answers, and that's when young people need compassion and patience as well as a little bit of tough love.

Now, this is a challenge even in good times. And it can be especially tough during times like these, when parents have a lot on their minds. They're worrying about keeping their jobs or keeping their homes or their health care, paying their bills, trying to give their children the same opportunities that they had. And so it's understandable that parents get concerned. Some fathers who feel they can't support their families get distracted. And even those who are more fortunate may be physically present but emotionally absent.

I know that some of the young men who are here today might have their own concerns one day about being a dad. Some of you might be worried that if you didn't have a father, then you don't know how to be one when your turn comes. Some of you might even use that as an excuse and say, "Well, if my dad wasn't around, why should I be?"

Let's be clear: Just because your own father wasn't there for you, that's not an excuse for you to be absent also. It's all the more reason for you to be present. Now, there's no rule that says that you have to repeat your father's mistakes. Just the opposite; you have an obligation to break the cycle and to learn from those mistakes and to rise up where your own fathers fell short and to do better than they did with your own children.

That's what I've tried to do in my life. When my daughters were born, I made a pledge to them and to myself that I would do everything I could to give them some things I didn't have. And I decided that if I could be one thing in life, it would be to be a good father.

I haven't always known exactly how to do that. I've made my share of mistakes; I've had to ask a lot of questions. But I've also learned from men that I admire. And one good example is Michelle's father, Fraser Robinson, who was a shining example of loving, responsible fatherhood. Here is a man who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis when he was 30 years old, but he still got up every day, went to a blue-collar job. By the time I knew him, he was using two crutches to get around, but he always was able to get to every dance recital, every ballgame of Michelle's brother. He was there constantly and helped to shape extraordinary success for his children.

And that's the standard that I strive for, though I don't always meet it. And as I've said before, I've made mistakes as a parent, and I'm sure I will make plenty more. There have been days when the demands of work have taken me from my duties as a father, and I've missed some moments in my daughters' lives that I'll never get back. So I've been far from perfect.

But in the end, it's not about being perfect. It's not always about succeeding, but it's about always trying. And that's something everybody can do. It's about showing up and sticking with it and going back at it when you mess up and letting your kids know, not just with words, but with deeds, that you love them and that you're always—they're always your first priority.

And we need dads, but also men who aren't dads, to make this kind of commitment not just in their own homes to their own families, but to the many young people out there who aren't lucky enough to have responsible adults in their lives. We need committed, compassionate men to serve as mentors and tutors and big brothers and foster parents. Even if it's just for a couple hours a week of shooting hoops or helping with homework or just talking about what's going on in that young person's life. Even the smallest moments can end up having an enormous impact, a lasting impact on a child's life.

So I am grateful to many of the organizations that are here, that are working on these issues. Some are faith-based, some are not. Some are government funded, some are privately funded. But all of you have those same commitments to making sure that we are lifting up the importance of fatherhood in our communities.

This is not the end, this is the beginning of what I hope is going to be a national dialog. And we're going to have regional townhall meetings, as Mike may have mentioned, to make sure that participants all across the country are starting to have that positive effect in their communities.

And I especially want to thank the young people who are here today, because you're the ones who are going to have to carry this message forward.

So with that—I know we've already had some discussion, and what I want to do is to see if we can expand the conversation. We should have some microphones in the audience so that everybody can be heard. Am I correct? Mike, are you going to be like Oprah?

Mr. Michael Strautmanis. I'm not going to be like Oprah. *[Laughter]* This is for you.

The President. All right. This is for you. Okay. So what I want to do is just call on some folks. They can ask a question; they can share a story. Organizations that are doing great work on fatherhood, please tell us a little bit about the work that you are doing. And I want to especially hear from some of the young people who somehow ended up sitting in the back. *[Laughter]* I don't know how that happened. But—all right, I'm going to start with this young man right here.

Go ahead. Introduce yourself. Stand up, please.

Growing Up Without a Father

Q. Yes. My name is Roland Warren. I'm president of an organization called National Fatherhood Initiative. And first, just thank you for what you're doing on this issue. Just—and a lot of folks have been sort of toiling on this issue for a number of years, and to have you come forward and step up and make this a national priority is really important.

And one of the things I just want to say to you, that your message, in terms of the fact that even though you've had, obviously, tremendous success without your dad, the fact that you really needed him and that kids have a hole in their souls essentially in the shape of their dad, I think, is pretty important, because we really need to focus on that issue; that we got to change the legacy and help our kids pass on the legacy—have our dads pass on a different legacy than maybe they inherited.

I grew up without my dad as well and went to Princeton and things of that nature, but still needed him. And that's one of the reasons I do the work that I do. So I really——

The President. Terrific.

Q. ——am delighted that you're doing the great work that you're doing around this issue.

The President. Thank you so much. Yes, I really want to emphasize this point about how just small moments and gestures can make a huge difference. A lot of folks know I love playing basketball. But it was my father who gave me my first basketball. Even though he wasn't a part of my life, in the few weeks that I was with him, he gave me a basketball.

A lot of folks know I love jazz. It turns out he took me to my first jazz concert. I didn't remember this until later on in life, but just that imprint is powerful. And imagine if that's sustained every day. And especially, young men, when they hit the teenage years, to have somebody there who is there to steady them and to provide them with some guidance, that makes all the difference in the world.

And again, this is not to take away from the heroic work that moms are doing. It's to emphasize moms need some help, because if you're a single mom like mine was, and maybe they're going to school or working, the pressures are enormous. And having somebody else there who's able to carry on that child-rearing responsibility is absolutely critical.

So, anybody else? Let me get one of these young people here. Go ahead.

Being a Father and Being the President of the United States

Q. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Larry Holmes. I attend St. Albans School for Boys. And I would like to ask you a question.

The President. Yes, go ahead.

Q. Traveling from State to State, country to country, being the President, which one is funner—being a father or being a President? [*Laughter*]

The President. Oh, well—well, I mean this: Nothing is more fun than being a father. Now, my kids aren't teenagers yet—[*laughter*—so I don't know whether that will maintain itself. [*Laughter*] But right now the greatest joy I get is just hanging out with the girls and talking to them and watching them grow and succeed.

And probably the most fun that I've had since I've been President was actually at a parent-teachers conference where the teachers were bragging on my children. [*Laughter*] And I just sat there, and I just basked in the glory of—[*laughter*]. And that—nothing is more important than that. And I think a lot of fathers can relate to that.

But here's the important point, is that, with as many responsibilities as I have—and I've got a huge support structure and staff and whatnot—it turns out that you can still carve out time to make sure that you're having a conversation with your kid.

And what it does mean is, is that fathers sometimes have to give up stuff that they'd like to do instead, like just sit there and watch "Sportscenter." [*Laughter*] And I know we got D-Wade here. I like watching the highlights, but sometimes instead of watching the third, fourth, fifth time—[*laughter*—"Sportscenter," I just watch it once—[*laughter*—so that I can then spend time with the girls, because they don't like watching basketball that much. But being President is pretty fun too, no doubt about it.

All right. Great question. Next. Yes, sir, right here.

Training for Fathers

Q. Thank you, sir.

The President. Here, you got a microphone.

Q. Hi, Mr. President. My name is Chris Maples. I founded an organization in Indianapolis called Dads, Inc., four years ago today, actually. And I hope that these dialogs continue to let everybody know that this isn't a rich or poor, a North or South, a black or white; this is—this affects everybody from the upper class to the lower class. And that's who we work with, that broad range. And over these 4 years, I've just heard dramatic stories of—just so appreciative that we have a service in Indianapolis for all fathers, and that everybody is appreciative of that. And I hope we can keep that up on a national level too.

The President. Absolutely. Absolutely. I think this is really important to emphasize: Twenty-three percent of young people are growing up without fathers. Now, in the African American community, it's close to 50 percent, maybe a little over, depending on the statistics that you look at. So there is a real crisis going on in the African American community on this issue, but it is a more pervasive issue.

And I just went to a wonderful organization called Year Up that has young people who are getting trained after high school, most of them, on specific job-training skills, computer skills, but also how to conduct themselves in an office and write an e-mail and—et cetera. And it was wonderful talking to these young people. But one of the things I said specifically to the young men is that you can't use anything as an excuse not to be involved with your children. Because kids—they won't judge you based on whether you're wealthy or poor. They will judge you if you are abusive to their mother. They will judge you in terms of you not showing up when they need you. That's what makes a difference.

And kids will respect their fathers if their fathers are showing kindness and are modeling—that they're working hard and trying to do what's right for their families. And kids will understand that sometimes families fall on hard times. They get that. Joe Biden is here—and, Joe, actually, I want to talk to you, because you had a terrific relationship with your dad, but there was a time where your dad fell on some hard times, and yet you still talk about him all the time as the most important guiding role model in your life.

Vice President Joe Biden. Well, Mr. President, I think it's great what you're doing, by the way. This is a big deal. Folks, you know, the President said sometimes fathers make mistakes, and I've made my share. But there's one thing my father told me—there's a mistake a father should never make, and that is communicating to his child there's anything other than total unconditional love. If there's total unconditional love—that includes discipline—but if there's total unconditional love, it doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor, whether or not you're a real smart dad or you're not such a smart dad, whether you're handsome or you're not so. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Kids need love.

And as a single parent, Mr. President, I did that for a while, having two sons, as Evan knows. And what I can say to you is—my mom has an expression. He's always kidding me. I'm always saying my mom and dad's expressions. But my mom has an expression, and she said—I could hear her when she was a kid—or when I was a kid, saying it to her peers. She said, "Be careful how you treat your children; you may need them some day." [*Laughter*]

And I want to tell you, the President knows my sons and my daughter. It doesn't change. The happiest thing in the world is being a father. This day, my 40-year-old son is attorney general of the State of Delaware. The President sees it in my 39-year-old son and my 27-year-old daughter. If my son, Attorney General, Captain Biden walked in the door from Iraq today, the first thing he'd do is walk up and give me a kiss. I mean it. And this is not—a kid who knows how to handle himself.

But the point is it gives me more joy, and I think it gives every father in this room more joy than any other thing that happens in your life, whether your son or daughter does that.

So, Mr. President, you're a great President. You're a great dad. And you're really good to be doing this. It's a big deal.

The President. Thank you. All right. Thank you. All right. Anybody back here want to comment on some of the things they heard or saw or—go ahead.

President's Decision to Run for Office

Q. I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. President. At one point, you had to decide you wanted to run for President, with two young daughters. Can you share with us how you had to wrestle with that decision?

The President. Well, it's a great question, and I think I've said this publicly before—the first question, the threshold question that I had to ask in conjunction with Michelle, because this was a joint decision, was, could our family handle it? And frankly, if it hadn't been for Michelle's extraordinary strength and commitment, I could not have done it and would not have done it. And she was able to handle, for big chunks of time, being like a single mom.

Now, I want to emphasize we are luckier than most; we've got more resources than most. And so I don't want to diminish how tough it is if you're working two shifts, you're coming home beat, and then suddenly you're also expected to help on the homework and do all these things. It's a big challenge for a lot of families. And we had more resources than most, but it was still a very difficult decision.

Frankly, I don't think we would have made the same decision if our kids were a little older. Part of the reason it was okay was because when I started running, Sasha was 5, Malia was 8, and they were still in Chicago; they had my mother-in-law, and they had a whole network and a community and a family that could help and support them. And so as a consequence, we figured out they would thrive.

The person who suffered the most was me, because I would be calling from God knows where, and they'd be having fun and laughing—[*laughter*]—and kids don't talk on the phone that well. [*Laughter*] So I'd be, "Sasha, how was your day?" "Fine." [*Laughter*] "What did you do?" "Nothing." [*Laughter*] You guys have had those conversations. [*Laughter*]

And so there were times where just physically I wanted to just be with them, and just couldn't. And so it was the hardest part of deciding to run for President.

The best thing about being President, by the way, is having a home office, because that means that I get home for dinner and—even if I have to go back to work, and then that makes all the difference in the world.

So, okay. Ed, got one right behind you. No, no, got one—right back.

Importance of Real-Life Images of Fatherhood

Q. I'm used to you throwing my questions away.

The President. No, I wouldn't do that. Go ahead.

Q. I'm just kidding. Listen, I just wanted to thank you very much. We started an initiative with Al Dotson and a hundred black men called Daddy's Promise, which really takes a look at fathers involving themselves in their daughters' lives, and you've been a great image for that. And what I just wanted to tell everybody is the service that you've given us, just with the image of you and your family and your daughters, has gone and made tenfold in terms of it being easier to tell men to involve themselves, because as we know, the media and the image is so powerful. And, A, I'd like to thank you very much——

The President. I appreciate that.

Q. ——for that, and being upfront on that, and encourage everyone to do so in your neighborhoods, because as much as we look to this man and others in the media, it is those of you who are there on an everyday basis. And when you see parents with children, it goes a long, long way. So we thank you for that.

The President. Well, I appreciate that. But I think you made the right point, Ed, which is, it's one thing seeing people on TV; it's another thing seeing that young father down the street who's just like you, except he's holding his baby in his arms or taking that toddler to the park or participating in the Little League. That's where young people get, sort of, their images, what it means to be a man, more than they do from whatever is on the screen. But I very much appreciate what you said.

Okay, I'm going to call on a token mom here just so that she can comment on these things.

Positive Portrayals of Fathers

Q. I'm Reverend Dr. Barbara Williams Skinner.

The President. It's great to see you.

Q. Good to see you. I want to say for women—I'm a mother and a grandmother—this is a day of celebration for us. We just felt our shoulders lifted. Not having had a father, but I—thank you for Bill Cowher and Mr. McDaniels from Run DMC coming over to Ballou. The only time you hear about Ballou High School is when someone is shot or killed. Today the kids asked us—they said, "They're coming to see us?" So I want to thank you on their behalf—that you cared enough about children who are on the other side of the river.

And now my question is, how do we keep lifting up the stories of the kid who's not in trouble, who goes past the drug dealers, who decides to stay in school, as opposed to all the—we spend so much emphasis on what's not working. How do we talk about what is working?

The President. Well, look, I think you make a great point. First of all, I do want to thank all these wonderful men who took the time to go out and—Coach Cowher, this is the first time that you've seen Redskins fans cheer for you—[laughter]—that doesn't happen that often—but these extraordinary men for taking the time to do this. Please give them a big round of applause.

But I think you're absolutely right, Reverend, that sometimes we've got to lift up success instead of just remarking on failure, because—the young men that I met at the trip that I took to Year Up, these were extraordinary young people. They were poised, and they were polished,

and they were—and these are all kids from the neighborhood, but they had—somebody had reached out to show that they care.

And it turns out that young people are incredibly resilient. It doesn't take that much. All it takes is somebody to put a hand on them and say, "You know what? You're important, and I'm listening to you." And if it's the wrong person who's putting that hand on them, if it's the gang-banger that's putting that hand on them, then they'll respond to that. And if it's a person in the community who is working hard, they'll respond to that.

And so we do need to affirm positive behavior and not just condemn negative behavior, because a lot of times young people just—they just need to be told that if you—one of the neat things about this program that I was looking at was they had a whole code. The first thing that they trained young people on was how do you interact with others, so everybody that you met, they were shaking your hand and looking at you in the eye, and they weren't mumbling. And there were certain words that they had banned from usage, not just curse words, either. They were saying, you know, don't go around saying, "shorty" and "What's up, G?" and—because that's not professional. And all that was important to them, and they absorbed it very quickly. But it requires spending a little time and then lifting up some role models. So, okay?

Mr. Strautmanis. Last question.

The President. All right. This is always tough, the last-question thing. *[Laughter]* I'm going to call on one of these young people again. Here you go. Go ahead. This young man right here; he had his hand up.

The President's Experiences as a First-Time Father

Q. I was wondering——

The President. What's your name?

Q. I'm Nick, and I'm also from St. Albans.

The President. Hey, Nick. Yes, you're with this crew here.

Q. And, Mr. President, I was wondering how you felt when you first became a father.

The President. Well, let me tell you the story of me. First of all, Malia was born on the Fourth of July. And every first father has this memory of you're waiting and you're waiting, and then suddenly Michelle woke me up at around 3–4 o'clock, and I was sleepy, and she says, "Hey, buster, I think this may be happening." And you jump out—it was like a movie. I was jumping out of the bed and looking for my shoes and the bag.

And things went fairly smoothly. But the first time you see that child, and bringing her home, driving really slow—*[laughter]*—in that little car seat, and then that night, knowing that there was this new life inside your house in a little bassinet, and remembering to check on them every 5 minutes to make sure they're still breathing—*[laughter]*—and then feeling them lying on your chest when you've fed them and they're falling asleep, and you knew at that moment something that—if you're not a father yet, people say and you don't believe, which is, at that moment, you realize you will do anything for that child—that there's nothing you wouldn't do for them in a heartbeat. And that bond between a parent and a child is something that is precious. It's sacred, and it's a true blessing.

And sometimes I think in the hustle of life you forget what a blessing that is, and that ultimately, after all this stuff is done, after Joe and I are retired and nobody knows our name—

[laughter]—the one thing that we'll remember is—are those moments when you were holding your kid and watching them grow and the first time they walked. And that's the stuff that will stay with you.

And that's why, if there's one last thing I want to communicate to those fathers who maybe haven't been involved in their child's life, it's to emphasize that this isn't an obligation. This is a privilege to be a father. And that's something that all of us should take on for themselves.

So thank you, everybody, for participating. I appreciate you. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:34 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. Participating in the townhall were CPO John Lehen, USN, Command Naval Reserve Force Command, Transportation Command, Norfolk, VA; Joseph T. Jones, Jr., founder, president, and chief executive officer, Center for Urban Families; Juan Carlos Artero, graduate of the Year Up program; Etan Thomas, center, Washington Wizards; Mike Laas, president, James H. Laas Company; Chief of Staff to the Assistant to the President for Intergovernmental Relations and Public Engagement Michael Strautmanis; Dwyane Wade, guard, Miami Heat; Albert E. Dotson, national president, 100 Black Men; Ed Gordon, founder, Daddy's Promise; Barbra Williams Skinner, president, Skinner Leadership Institute; Bill Cowher, former head coach, Pittsburgh Steelers; and Darryl "DMC" McDaniels, member of the hip-hop group Run DMC. In his remarks, the President referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng; his brother-in-law Craig Robinson; television personality and entrepreneur Oprah Winfrey; and his mother-in-law Marian Robinson.

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Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Artero, Juan Carlos; Bayh, Evan; Biden, Joseph R. Jr.; Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Cowher, Bill; Davis, Danny K.; Gordon, Ed; Jones, Joseph T., Jr.; Laas, Mike; LaHood, Ray H.; Lehen, John; Maples, Christopher; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Robinson, Craig; Robinson, Marian; Skinner, Barbara Williams; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Strautmanis, Michael; Thomas, Etan; Wade, Dwyane; Warren, Roland; Winfrey, Oprah.

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